

# NATURAL HISTORY MISCELLANEA

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## The Status of *Sphaerodactylus nigropunctatus*, a Neotropical Gecko

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The holotype of *Sphaerodactylus nigropunctatus* Gray is in the British Museum and is their only specimen determined as such. Specimens in American collections which do not agree with the type in many ways have nevertheless been labeled *S. nigropunctatus*. In an endeavor to resolve the facts, H. W. Parker, Keeper of Zoology of the British Museum, has by his patience and kindness made this note possible. In a letter, 24 August, 1956 he wrote :

"I have tried to get some line on the type locality of *S. nigropunctatus*, but without much success. The specimen appears not to have been entered in our pre-1845 registers where very few reptiles were entered although birds and mammals were. It was entered in 1946<sup>2</sup> as 'No. 1946. 8. 24. 81'. Leadbeater, from whom the specimen was purchased, was a dealer, and so the specimen could have come from anywhere. It is, however, likely that it came in as part of some general collection. The only bird and mammal collections received from Leadbeater before 1845 from the right part of the world and with something approaching a 'locality' were from Bogota, Coban and Jamaica."

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<sup>2</sup>With regard to the date of cataloging; "1946" for a specimen described in 1845, Mr. Parker kindly wrote me under date of 11 January, 1957, as follows: "With regard to the date, 1946 is correct. The specimen was actually received in the Museum long before any system of registration was in vogue. In 1946, however, we re-registered all our type specimens (or at least, those that were then recognized as being types) so as to have a single register containing all our type material. So the specimen got a register number then. It may not have been a very wise move to make that register because it does mean that the majority of our types have two numbers, but something of the kind had to be done. When the collections were evacuated during the war a fungus attacked the paper labels on the bottles. Labels inside the bottles with the names on were all right, but very often the numbers were lost. To have plowed through the register for a century or more trying to discover what the original numbers might have been was a task we just could not face."

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Gray's original description (1845, Cat. Liz. Brit. Mus. :168) : "Back and tail with small scales . . . The Blackdotted Sphaerodactyle. *Sphaerodactylus nigropunctatus*. Reddish grey, with very numerous minute black specks . . . In spirits. S. America." Mr. Parker wrote Jan. 11, 1957 that the type is a male.

Boulenger, studying the same specimen 31 years later (1885, Cat. Liz. Brit. Mus., 1 :220), said : "Agrees with *S. sputator* in general characters, but the granules of the flanks are considerably larger than those on the middle of the back. Brown (the very numerous minute black specks mentioned by Gray being no longer visible), tail and lower surfaces lighter. From snout to vent 35 mm.; tail 32 mm." Boulenger placed a question mark where Gray had said "S. America." Boulenger published a drawing of the snout showing only one scale bordering the rostral between the internasals.

H. W. Parker's description of the holotype in the same letter follows: "The lepidosis of the holotype is almost uniform, the granules of the flanks being only slightly larger than those of the middle of the back. The dorsal granules are almost subimbricate and 0.2 mm. long; at the middle of the flanks, half way between axil and groin, granules are 0.2 to 0.3 mm. long; the midventral scales are 0.4 mm. in length. Only at one spot are there a few granules that are very distinctly larger and I suspect that this area may be a scar; the specimen must have been mutilated in life since the hand on the same side as the suspected scar has only two fingers. The granules are completely devoid of any trace of a keel and there is no median zone of smaller granules. Although the holotype is discoloured a uniform dark brown it is possible to see that it must originally have had a finely peppered appearance; melanin granules are still to be seen, but these are very small; 0 to 4 or 5 or even 10 on larger granules. They are not aggregated into patches to form a pattern. There are three granules only between the nostrils and bordering the rostral; in other words, the two large supranasals are separated by a single scale."

From the above we have the description of a sphaerodactyl with smooth, unkeeled granules; it is finely specked with minute melanin granules which do not form any pattern; there is only one scale between the supranasals.

The following quotations of American authors describe "*S. nigropunctatus*" and illustrate a sphaerodactyl with keeled, imbricating scales; marked sometimes with black or white dots covering several

scales, and with various head and scapular patterns ; a row of four scales between the supranasals.

Barbour (1914, Mem. Mus. Comp. Zool., 44(2) :261) states: "Of this species, the type locality of which was unknown, the Museum has specimens, which Garman has identified, from Santiago de Cuba . . . Mr. C. T. Ramsden has sent a specimen from Guantanamo which seems to be referable to this species. It is, however, almost black in general color with two white dots side by side upon the nuchal region."

Barbour and Ramsden (1919, Mem. Mus. Comp. Zool., 47(2) :119) state in their key : "Scales very small, almost granular, although distinctly keeled and imbricate" ; and on page 124: "Diagnosis . . . distinguished . . . by having very minute dorsal scales which are not granules but elongated keeled scales with a slight tendency to imbricate. On the sides the scales are larger .... a very small supranasal, which is separated from its fellow on the opposite side by four small scales, these six scales bordering the rostral posteriorly; .... rich mahogany brown, speckled with black, a lighter streak around the head and a series of light dots across the nape." Plate 3, Fig. 1, of the same work is of a dark lizard with scattered black spots, each occupying several contiguous scales, three white dots outlined by dark across nape and light lines along sides of head.

Barbour (1921, Mem. Mus. Comp. Zool., 47(2) :226) includes the following in his key: "Dorsals about 12, supranasals small, separated usually by four scales about their own size." On p. 247: " . . . four scales bordering the rostral behind and between the supranasals . . . scales of back small, somewhat elongate, keeled and very slightly imbricate about thirteen in a straight series equalling the distance of tip of snout from centre of eye .... " Plate 17, Fig. 1-4, depicts a section of the dorsals and three views of the head. The dorsals are shown longer than wide, distinctly keeled, somewhat blunt and all of the same size. The upper view of the head shows six scales of equal size bordering the rostral between the nostrils. A footnote on page 247: "Until the type can be reexamined it is uncertain that these Cuban specimens are correctly assigned."

Dalmau (1955, Univ. de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba, Lista de los reptiles de Cuba), translated by this author, states: "Appears to be very rare. Known only from the region of Guantanamo, Oriente, where it is abundant. Color bright mahogany with light dots scattered over the body. Dorsal scales very small, not granules, with slight tendency

on the following page, he states that the scales are "very small, almost granular, but distinctly keeled and imbricate." This seems to be a good description of *S. argus* which is found in Cuba, but why a species with light spots should be classified as *nigropunctatus* is not clear. However, I examined a good specimen of *S. argus* from a private collection which was labeled *S. nigropunctatus*, Cuba, and was told that black spots probably had turned white as in the case of the Mexican garter snake which developed white spots (H. M. Smith, 1955, *Herpetologica*, 11(3):165).

-Summary : The type of *S. nigropunctatus* has smooth dorsal granules ; there is no color pattern ; granules bear from 0 to 10 tiny melanin granules; only one scale between the two large supranasals ; type locality in doubt. Later writers have identified as *S. nigropunctatus*, specimens supposedly from Cuba which have keeled dorsals ; a pattern of black or white spots and some with a scapular pattern ; a row of four scales between the supranasals. These descriptions probably represent more than one species.

Inasmuch as there is no reason to believe that the type came from Cuba and since no Cuban specimens have been found which are even similar to the type, it would seem best to drop *S. nigropunctatus* from the fauna of Cuba. As for Jamaica being the possible type locality, I can vouch for the fact that there has been no sphaerodactyl described from there which even resembles the type. The original description gave "S. America" as the type locality and I see no reason for doubting it. The specimen described and figured by Barbour remains undescribed or erroneously identified.